

# ‘Youth language’ in ancient Rome

Peter Kruschwitz and Egizia Felice

Ever wondered what it was like to be young in Pompeii or why it is that young people today develop their own expressions, slang, and idiom? Evidence from ancient art, graffiti, and literature points to the existence of ‘youth language’ in Rome as teenagers there too looked for ways of expressing their independence.

Octavia Apro was in her early twenties when she died:

*Octavia Apro  
ro vicsit  
anis XXII.  
ti quicumque lecis  
sit tibi suavite[r].*

*‘Octavia Apro lived twenty-two years. Whoever you are who reads this, may it go swimmingly for you.’  
(Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL) VI 35979)*

This funerary inscription, discovered in the city of Rome, is a most remarkable text. Of course, we do not know for sure who Octavia Apro was: a freedwoman perhaps, as the Graeco-Roman hybrid name Octavia Ap(h)ro suggests? We do not know who dedicated this inscription in her honour. Her partner, most probably? What we do know, is that the person who composed this text for her struggled with ‘standard Latin’ and its orthography.

Not the most obvious, but by far the most remarkable feature of this text is the expression *sit tibi suaviter*. *Sit tibi bene* (‘be well’) would have caused little or no irritation; but *sit tibi suaviter*? Parallels can only be found in Petronius’ satirical novel *The Satyricon* and in Horace. In Petronius it is used by the common and ill-educated host Trimalchio (*Satyricon* 59.1) and, subsequently, by the tipsy stonemason Habinnas (*Satyricon* 65.11). In both instances it appears to signify something like ‘to go swimmingly’, and Petronius on both occasions clearly wanted his characters to be linguistically out of order. Scholars have classified this as colloquial or sometimes even ‘vulgar’ speech (‘vulgar’ as in ‘of the *vulgus*’, i.e. the common people).

But how does such an expression fit into a funerary inscription, i.e. a context in which one would want to appear neither

silly nor blatantly uneducated? A possible explanation could be that whoever wrote this text was simply using a wording that he or she deemed permissible, perhaps even regarded as a fashionable replacement for a formulation that they feared had become trite. The phrase may well have been an expression of the writer’s everyday use. The relatively youthful age of the deceased makes such an assumption even more appealing. In fact, the young Horace, in his *Satires*, styles himself as using the same casual expression upon encountering an impertinent blabbermouth on Rome’s *Via Sacra* (*Satires* 1.9.5). Was there such a thing as a *sermo puerilis* or ‘youth language’ in ancient Rome, a linguistic variety that is characteristic of young people?

## Down with the kids

Who counted as ‘young’ in Ancient Rome? Lower life expectancy, the possibility that puberty was later than it is today, and the fact that girls were normally married at fifteen make this a difficult question. But whenever Roman men and women reached puberty, it has to be the starting point of what we consider as ‘youth’, as the sexual awakening sets the timeframe for various transitions, changes, and rites of passage.

Romans likened the awkward sound of the human language that coincided with the onset of puberty to the crowing of a rooster (*gallulascere*) or the bleating of a goat (*hirquitallio*). In addition they repeatedly describe what they regard as characteristics or, more often still, as ‘faults’ of this kind of ‘teenage’ language: careless pronunciation (*os balbum*, Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.126), pleasure derived from pointless sound effects (especially rhyme patterns, *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 4.32), and a tendency towards inane, careless

chatter with little decorum or concern for potential consequences (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.4.15–16). This was why the human voice and the human language needed schooling through rhetorical exercise: lack of physical, intellectual, and rhetorical power is an obstacle to be negotiated, and being able to speak with authority was an essential life skill in ancient Rome, at least for those who had any major ambitions.

On the other hand, are these simplifying and popularizing objections against the linguistic behaviour of young people that different from what one finds in public discourse about youth language in many Western societies today? Hardly.

## Teenage rebellion?

At the time when Octavia Apro lived there, Rome was a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual melting pot with a hugely diverse population: a fact that, as we said, was already reflected in her very name. Modern parallels demonstrate that this constitutes an ideal environment for the creation and spread of a subversive urban youth culture and its distinctive language-use. One can be confident that writers such as Martial and Tacitus had this very segment of Rome’s society in mind when they referred to the city’s *vaga iuventus* (‘unsteady youth’), a distinct social group, defined by its age and its common need to establish itself in its community, easily swayed by emotions, pushing its way through adolescence – and of course engaging in various typical ‘young’ activities.

The ultimate aims of any young (male) Roman during the process of growing up must have been emancipation from his family (the father, in particular), affirmation of himself over his peers, and achievement of a respected status within his community. Due to the silence of our sources, it is next to impossible to work out to what extent any of this was affected by the negotiation of cultural and national identities that being a non-Roman in a multi-ethnic city like Rome demanded: how would it make a difference in this process if, in addition to everything else, a youth was (like Octavia Apro) of Greek

or Syriac descent?

However, our primary sources do rather nicely document the intense nightlife of the Roman youth, which, unsurprisingly, involved, among other things, sex and vandalism. The language used in these contexts, and often reflected in comedic genres, was peculiar to the fervent character of the activities: on the one hand, promises, tender terms, terms of endearment, and purpose-driven persuasive words to approach girls, and on the other, excessive use of imagery and intensifiers suitable for acts of wilful damage. Outrageous and provocative behaviour, a focus of urban youth activity, thus extends to, and is informed by, linguistic behaviour as well.

Not only literary sources document these activities. Thousands of graffiti are scratched into the surfaces of the ancient walls of the Vesuvian towns, Pompeii and Herculaneum, many of them childish and offensive in their content. These were to a large extent produced by the young and the youthful.

To give but one example, there is an interesting group of inscriptions, comprising short graffiti, often hardly more than a single word, all of which show what appear to be adverbial greetings ending in *-biliter*. There is the obvious *amabiliter*, ‘lovingly’, but also the somewhat more interesting *fratrabiliter*, ‘brotherly’ (CIL IV 659. 8227). Additionally, in Pompeii (unlike in Herculaneum, as apparently Pompeii was a more vibrant urban community), there are also obscene manifestations of the same type: *irrumabiliter* (CIL IV 1931), *inclinabiliter* (CIL IV 356 = 5406. 1322), and *ceventinabiliter* (CIL IV 356 = 5406. 4126), all of which refer to sex acts. Yet, the formation of these phrases is as playful as it is provocative: a bit like Austin Powers’ ‘shagstastic!’ It is, therefore, an appealing assumption that Pompeian youth picked up the word formation of a typical greeting, like *amabiliter salutem* (‘greetings, heartily’), and then turned it into ‘street speak’.

### Freedom of expression

Adolescence also meant having to negotiate one’s place in one’s own family – a difficult task in a highly patriarchal society like Roman society. For independence to be won, the young had to shift from an essentially submissive state towards a confident position of authority. The apologetic vocabulary of children, here that of a girl, presumably in her very early teens, is illustrated in Tacitus’ *Annals*, when Tacitus describes how the daughter of Seianus faces her fate:

*puella adeo nescia, ut crebro interrogaret, quod ob delictum et quo trahentur; neque facturam ultra, et*

*posse se puerile verbere moneri.*

*Programme.*

*The girl was so clueless that she asked again and again, for what and where she was being taken; she would not do it again, and it would be perfectly possible to punish her with the children’s whip.*

(*Annals* 5[6].9)

The unparalleled use of *monere*, ‘to punish’ (literally: to admonish), as well as the phrase *neque facturam ultra*, ‘won’t do it again’, are clearly employed to evoke the sound of a young girl – and as such she is of course not taken seriously by her abductors.

Not to be taken seriously is a constant experience for the young, and not only in contexts as drastic as the one Tacitus describes: even in ordinary family life, the young had to grow up gradually, establishing themselves in various social networks before they were able to find their actual position in a society. Lack of physical, intellectual, and rhetorical power is frequently mentioned in the ancient sources. An outstanding piece, witness to a young man’s flailing attempts to tackle his father’s power, is found in a famous Greek letter from Roman Egypt:

*If you won’t take me with you to Alexandria, I won’t write you a letter or speak to you or say goodbye to you; and if you go to Alexandria I won’t take your hand nor ever greet you again. That is what will happen if you won’t take me. (...) If you don’t, I won’t eat, I won’t drink; there now!’*

(*Oxyrhynchus Papyri* I 118)

Whether or not the writer of the above lines was taken any more seriously by his father than before, is unknown: clearly there was still room for rhetorical education to work its magic. At any rate, it has become clear that ‘youth language’, broadly conceived, is an area that requires further research and an area that is likely to yield exciting discoveries in the future. From the initial evidence presented here, it seems clear that such future findings will involve word choices and pronunciation of Latin just as much as word formation, syntax, and pragmatics. In that respect, the youth of ancient Rome seems to have behaved very much like its modern counterpart – and to have been met with the same prejudice and lack of understanding!

*Egizia Felice has just finished her first degree in Classics at the University of Reading, where Peter Kruschwitz is Professor of Classics. This piece is a result of Egizia’s linguistic abilities and Peter’s desire to understand youth. Its writing was generously supported by Reading’s Under-graduate Research Opportunities*